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## **CULTURES OF OPTIMISM**

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### **Abstract**

*Drawing on material from a broad range of fields, this article identifies an 'optimism of everyday life' and proposes that it performs significant psychological, social and cultural functions. These functions are briefly reviewed, with particular reference to psychological and physical health, family and social relationships and the achievement of goals in different contexts. It is argued that the necessity of optimism has given rise to a complex of optimism promoters, which function as agents of implicit cultural policy. The family, religious institutions, the medical profession, psychotherapists and counsellors, businesses and political leaders are, amongst others, all seen to be part of this complex, deeply engaged in the reproduction of a culture of optimism. Whilst a multiplicity of values is reflected in individual expressions of optimism, a kind of meta-value is expressed in its common, cognitive form: of energy over entropy, of living over dying.*

Keywords: Optimism, culture, cultural policy, implicit cultural policy

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## Introduction

In a letter to Elie Bertrand in February 1756, Voltaire described optimism as ‘a counsel of despair, a cruel philosophy with a consoling name’ (2005, 121). Of course, he was not using the term in the sense to which we are now accustomed, that is, to denote a psychological attitude, but in the sense of optimism as a philosophical position. This had been first expounded by the German philosopher, Gottfried Leibnitz (1966), who had argued that we inhabited the best of all possible worlds because God, being all-powerful and all-knowing, was incapable of creating anything less. This was the doctrine that Voltaire so mercilessly satirised in *Candide*,<sup>1</sup> which he wrote two years after his letter to Bertrand, creating in Dr Pangloss a figure that would forever stand as a convenient referent for mindless optimism (2005).

According to Lewis White Beck (1969, 235), an alternative idea of optimism emerged out of the Enlightenment, which, in contrast to the acquiescence in suffering implied by Leibnitz and parodied in *Candide*, denoted a vision of the future in which human beings actively created a better world. There was a heroic quality to this kind of optimism, with which Voltaire himself was associated and which, in the twentieth century, was popularised by Gramsci with his ‘optimism of the will’ that could persist in the face of ‘pessimism of the intellect’ (Gramsci, 1973, 175). Leibnitz’s optimism, on the other hand, was a religiously-inspired optimism of faith, through which God’s will was seen to be benevolently working its way out in the world. This form of optimism can, of course, still be found in some contemporary Christian teaching (see, for example, Smith, 1995, 12) and secularised traces of it can arguably also be seen in the expectation produced by optimistic dispositions that good things rather than bad will generally happen.

During much of the twentieth century, however, Enlightenment optimism, closely associated with the idea of indefinite human progress, was eclipsed by the pervasive ‘pessimism of the intellect’ displayed by so many leading writers, artists and intellectuals of the time. Of course, such pessimism was not in itself new and, indeed, the optimism of the Enlightenment could arguably be seen to offer no more than a brief interlude within the predominantly pessimistic register of Western intellectual history. (Bennett, 2001, 1-12). Even by the nineteenth century, this optimism had

come under attack, with those such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche asserting that the forces of reason were no match for the destructive power of basic human desires. But it was during the twentieth century, described by Isaiah Berlin as ‘the most terrible century in Western history’, that the optimism of the Enlightenment came to be most comprehensively dismantled.

Sociology played its part in this process, with Max Weber, and, later, the Frankfurt School, proving particularly influential in their accounts of the development of instrumental rationality. But sociology formed only one tributary into a much broader literature of pessimism that accumulated over the century. For example, a significant proportion of early to mid-century artistic and literary modernism represented a view of history that could only be described as catastrophic. From the Berlin Dadaists to the Surrealists in Paris, from Eliot’s *Wasteland* to Kafka’s *Trial*, from the dystopias of Huxley and Orwell to the bleak landscapes of Samuel Beckett, writers and artists repeatedly denounced or despaired of the societies they inhabited. Their denunciations were delivered from radically differing positions and, politically, they could be seen to divide in extreme and polarised ways; but they shared a profound disillusion with the kind of world that philosophies of progress had bequeathed.

In the postmodern period, from the 1960s on, narratives of decline proliferated further, to the extent that they collectively represented a pessimism that could justifiably be described as ‘cultural’. Such narratives could be found – and this is by no means exhaustive – in fields that included ecology, human rights, military history, international relations, criminology, history of science, cultural criticism and political economy (Bennett, 2001, 16). In his magisterial account of counter-Enlightenment thinking, *Enemies of Hope*, Raymond Tallis charted in meticulous detail ‘the process by which contemporary humanity [was] talking itself into a terminal state of despair, self-disgust and impotence’ (1997, xiv).

From time to time, this pessimism was explicitly challenged - amongst others, by the American historian, Francis Fukuyama,(1992), by sporadic interventions from newspaper columnists (for example, Thompson-Noel, 1997 & Taylor, 2008), and, most comprehensively, by Raymond Tallis himself, as mentioned above. However, as Tallis caustically pointed out, pessimism had not only become deeply embedded in

the practice of cultural criticism, but it had also to some extent become a mark of moral and intellectual seriousness (1997, 180). Cultural optimists, on the other hand, were often portrayed as shallow apologists for human suffering, ridiculed for their Pollyanna-ish naivety or condemned for their complicity (Gable & Haidt, 2005, 107).

It is not the purpose of this article to evaluate the extent to which the claims of Enlightenment optimism may or may not be superior to those of counter-Enlightenment pessimism (or vice-versa). This debate has been well-rehearsed and, in any case, must always be as inconclusive as the future is uncertain. However, what the article does suggest, regardless of how endemic a pessimism of the intellect may have become, is that optimism nevertheless performs a number of very significant social and cultural functions. Indeed, it is proposed here that an ‘optimism of everyday life’ is so central to these functions that, without it, it is difficult to see how a society or civilisation would be able to sustain itself.

If this proposition is accepted, then the question arises of how such optimism is transmitted from one generation to the next. As we shall see, some anthropologists have contended that optimism, displayed as it has been within all human cultures, has been central to the process of human evolution (Tiger, 1995). Whilst this is an important reminder that culture takes place within an evolutionary and biological context, it does not, of course, explain the various social processes through which cultures of optimism are mediated and reproduced. These processes might properly be considered as manifestations of implicit cultural policy. However, before enquiring further into this, it is first necessary to establish what we mean by an ‘optimism of everyday life’ and to develop in more detail the proposition that it is indeed essential to our social functioning.

### **The Optimism of Everyday Life<sup>2</sup>**

In modern usage, optimism denotes a tendency to hold positive expectations of the future. It can be seen as a stronger version of hope, with which it is often used interchangeably (Gillham et al, 2000, 62). The older idea of optimism, as a philosophical position, has now largely fallen out of use, although the two concepts are clearly not unrelated. However, in the discussion that follows, I shall largely be

focusing on optimism in its modern sense, defined by Lionel Tiger (1995, 18) as ‘a mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future’.

This reference to mood usefully reminds us that optimism is not just a matter of ‘cold cognition’, to use Christopher Peterson’s phrase, but that it carries with it a strong emotional charge (Peterson, 2000, 45). In other words, the specific future imagined is not neutral but inextricably bound up with desirability, values and affect. Optimism also expresses probability – the belief that the anticipated future is more likely than not to materialise. Whilst such assessments of probability may perhaps involve ‘cold cognition’, even here, desirability can get mixed up with expectation, and expectations can end up reflecting as much what is desired as what is probable.

If optimism is an implicit expression of values and desires, it follows that it can have no single or absolute content, but will always be relative to the values and desires it expresses. Of course, there may be broad future scenarios, which most people would agree were desirable (for example, that planet Earth remained a hospitable environment for the human species), but desirable futures are as variable as values and will be constructed in different, and often conflicting, ways. One person’s optimism can be another’s pessimism.

The content of optimism can also be distinguished by its ambition or reach. Lionel Tiger (1995, 22) offers a distinction between ‘big optimism’ and ‘little optimism’ - the former expressing an attitude towards large matters, such as the condition of an economy or the outcome of a political struggle; the latter, an expression of more personal hopes, such as finding work or recovering from an illness. This might also be characterised as a distinction between an optimism looking outwards, to conditions in the external world, and an optimism looking inwards, to conditions in one’s own life. The two, of course, are not unrelated and, in some cultures, less unrelated than in others. Nevertheless, the respective scales of these optimisms are significantly different.

Given all these variables, it might be objected that an ‘optimism of everyday life’, as a general category, would denote so many incommensurate expectations of the future that its function could not be analysed with any degree of precision. However, if we

draw a distinction between optimism as an attitude of mind, involving both cognition and affect, and the specific futures that are actually imagined, then it becomes possible to consider optimism as a particular *mode* of viewing the future, whose function can be considered separately from the variety of its expressions; in other words, a separation of form from content.

Take, for example, the ‘big’ neo-Enlightenment optimism of Tallis or Fukuyama, which expresses an attitude towards progress and the general advancement of humanity, and contrast it to the countless ‘little’ optimisms that infuse most peoples’ lives. On the face of it, these might appear to have nothing in common – the former, an intellectual optimism, projected on to a large canvas; the latter, simply the expression of personal hopes and desires. Yet, what they share is an attitude towards an uncertain future, which can only be imagined; and *how* this future is imagined, whether on a large or small canvas, will at some level be inflected by a tendency – or disposition - towards optimism or pessimism.

Of course, it might be objected that, in the case of ‘big’ optimism, such inflections are neutralised by the cognitive rigours of academic and intellectual discipline; or, indeed, that it is not so much disposition that inflects cognition, but the other way round. These are important objections, which caution against too simplistic a model. Nevertheless, as I have argued elsewhere (Bennett, 2001, 194-5), cognition, disposition and affect are intricately bound up with one another and, even if we allow that disposition can be moderated by cognition, the distinction between optimism as form and optimism as content can still be maintained.

If the ‘form’ of optimism can be thus identified, the next task is to consider how its incidence might be established and the extent to which it can be found within the human population. Some preliminary conclusions on this can tentatively be drawn from studies in social psychology that have been conducted over the last thirty years or so and which, more recently, have led to the foundation of the ‘positive psychology’ movement (Gable & Haidt, 2005). In brief, this movement has arisen in reaction to what its founders perceive as an almost exclusive preoccupation with psychological damage, which, at least until relatively recently, has characterised the development of psychology, and clinical psychology in particular, since the 1950s. As

Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi have noted, the science of psychology has largely concentrated on ‘repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning’ (2000, 5).

Yet, this focus is at odds with how most people around the world experience their lives. Despite the evidence of the growing incidence of depression worldwide (Bennett, 2001, 189), studies have consistently shown that the majority of people in most places report that they are satisfied with their lives, even under very challenging conditions.<sup>3</sup> This, of course, is not to condone such conditions - even less to avert attention from the manifest injustices in the world – but to note only the widespread capacity of human beings to experience satisfactory lives and subjective well-being under adverse circumstances. Gable & Haidt argue that ‘most people are doing well’ and that psychologists have tended ‘to overlook the greater part of human experience and the majority of people, families, groups, and institutions’ (2005, 105). Positive psychology, therefore, attempts to correct this imbalance, by revisiting the ‘average person’ and investigating the mechanisms that enable the majority of people to function as well as they do. Psychology might thus acquire a more balanced and textured understanding of human experience, which could also yield new clinical applications.

Studies in optimism have featured prominently in the development of this movement. For example, Martin Seligman, one of its founders, shifted his attention to the function and promotion of optimism after years of studying the relationship between pessimism and depression. Seligman’s key discovery, which was consistently supported by subsequent research, was that an optimistic outlook played a crucial role in enabling people to sustain positive views of their life experiences and prospects across a broad range of contexts (1998, 207). As another group of leading researchers in the field put it, optimists ‘are less distressed when times are tough, they cope in ways that foster better outcomes for themselves and are more positive in their responses to adversity’ (Scheier et al, 2000, 208). These findings all suggest that the widespread incidence of subjective well-being, noted above, may be inextricably bound up with a corresponding incidence of optimism.



In the course of their research, Seligman and his colleagues also developed a number of different ways in which tendencies towards optimism (or pessimism) could be 'captured' or measured. Seligman himself is associated, in particular, with a mode of analysis that focuses on an individual's 'explanatory style' – that is, how he or she explains good or bad life events. Using a self-report questionnaire called the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ), the respondents are presented with a series of hypothetical events, both good and bad, and asked to indicate what they would consider to be the one major cause if these events were to happen to them. The answers are then rated along the three dimensions of 'permanence', 'pervasiveness' and 'personalisation', which together are held to make up an individual's explanatory style. Permanence implies that the suggested cause of the event will persist through time; pervasiveness, that the cause will bleed over from one department of an individual's life to another; and personalisation, that the individual, rather than external circumstances, is responsible for what has happened.

It follows from this that the higher the score in relation to good events, the higher an individual's level of optimism will be: good events will be expected to continue to happen (permanence); they will be expected to happen in not just one but many departments of life (pervasiveness); and the cause of these events will be attributed to the agency of the individual (personalisation). The higher the scores in relation to bad events, the higher will be the indications of pessimism. Low scores, of course, relating to either good or bad events, provide indications in the opposite direction (Seligman, 1998, 40-53).

One limitation of the ASQ method was that it could only be applied to the explanatory style of those willing and able to complete the ASQ questionnaire. This was overcome through an extension of the method, known as the Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations (CAVE). As well as using questionnaires, researchers found that they could extract causal statements from a broad range of recorded material, such as interviews, diaries and letters, and analyse them according to the ASQ scales. The analysis of explanatory style could thus be extended to a much wider range of people, including those no longer living. It also facilitated longitudinal studies, where recorded material was available from different periods of a person's life.

Whilst the ASQ and CAVE methods relate levels of optimism to perceptions of causality, another approach, developed by Michael Scheier and Charles Carver, focuses on what they term 'dispositional optimism'. Here, optimism is constructed as a personality variable, relatively stable across time and context, whose defining characteristic is simply an expectation that good things rather than bad will generally happen (1992, 2-3). It can be measured through a brief self-report questionnaire, known as the Life Orientation Test (LOT). Although the LOT measure reflects general expectation only, in contrast to the ASQ/CAVE focus on the respondent's perception of causality, the two approaches have tended to produce strikingly similar results (Peterson, 2000, 48).

Other constructs and measures of optimism have also been developed within psychology (see Norem & Chang, 2002 and Chang, 2000), but explanatory style and dispositional optimism remain the most widely cited. The weakness of these constructs, and, indeed, of constructs of optimism in general, is that they treat optimism as an isolatable element of human behaviour and do not take into account the extent to which it may have been influenced by other aspects of personality. As Norem & Chang have pointed out, 'the question of whether optimism ...[is] truly discriminable from related constructs has plagued researchers in this area from the start (2000, 351). Nevertheless, these measures are the best we have and, despite their limitations, which are to some extent an occupational hazard in all personality research, they do at least give us some way of understanding how, and how widely, an 'optimism of everyday life' actually manifests itself within the population.

A further perspective on optimism can also be gained from considering its biological aspects. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that there is a genetic component to both dispositional optimism and explanatory style (Gillham et al, 2000, 68), although it has not yet been possible to establish with any precision the extent of their heritability. Plomin et al (1992) put it about 25%, while Lykken & Tellegen (1996, 189), in a study of individual difference in human happiness (of which optimism can be seen as a constituent part), estimated it at around 50%. One of the factors that complicates measurement, as Marvin Zuckerman points out, is that the heritability of optimism may be indirect, that is to say, derived from the heritability of other personality traits. Zuckerman himself suggests that optimism is partly linked to

the genetic bases of extraversion, while pessimism is partly a function of genes that produce neuroticism (2000, 177). This mirrors the point, made above, about the extent to which optimism might be seen as a dependent personality variable.

In contrast, from a perspective of evolutionary psychology, Lionel Tiger has no difficulty in seeing optimism as an isolatable element of human behaviour (1995, 17). He argues that 'a neurophysiology for a sense of benignity of the future' has developed out of our common evolutionary history and that this explains why optimism has been a constant feature of all human cultures (1979, 51). A sense of optimism is thus a naturally occurring phenomenon within the majority of people and can be seen as no more and no less than an adaptive product of chemical neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and dopamine. Tiger also notes that one of the primary functions of recreational drugs, including alcohol, and anti-depressants is to make the future seem benign. These drugs could not work if the body was not already 'hard-wired' to produce this sense of benignity. Some empirical support for this proposition has recently been offered by scientists at New York University, who, through the use of magnetic resonance imaging, have claimed to pinpoint the cradle of optimism in two regions of the brain (Sharot et al, 2007). As Tiger observed thirty years ago, 'thinking rosy futures is as biological as sexual fantasies' (1995, 35).

For Zuckerman, the *homo sapiens* species must have been optimistic from the start, in order to come out of Africa and colonise the whole planet within the relatively short time span space of 100,000 years (2000, 170). Tiger seeks to explain this with reference to the transition made by vegetarian primate life to a hunting-gathering species. The capacity to conceptualise the future, and to anticipate positive outcomes, must have conferred an evolutionary advantage. As the human species developed, accompanied by a growth in the size of the human brain and the development of its large cerebral cortex, so did the capacity to think things through and to think ahead. 'Being a hunting species', Tiger argued, 'humans must have hope. There must ...be a programme for hope springing eternally in our innards' (1995, 21).

Tiger also connects these evolutionary developments with the emergence of religion (1995, 39-43). Once humans began to anticipate the future, then they could also imagine what they feared, including their own death. Primitive religion thus emerged

as a particular form of optimism, which could counteract the paralysing effects of imagined terrors. Tiger concludes that since a key function of religion is to offer the solace of optimism (and since optimism is a biological phenomenon), then religion itself must also have a biological basis, rooted in human genes - which is why it has reproduced itself in every civilisation.

There is still a great deal that we do not know about the biological dimension of optimism. It is an extremely complex area, involving not only evolutionary psychology but also behaviour genetics, neuropsychology and neuropharmacology (Zuckerman, 2000, 171). However, what can be said, as the observations above indicate, is that research findings in these areas are not inconsistent with the 'optimism of everyday life' that has been posited here. This is not, of course, to suggest that an optimistic outlook is simply passed from one generation to the next in a simple process of biological reproduction. There is a great deal of evidence, derived mainly from research on the relation of depression to pessimism, that indicates how a sense of optimism can be reinforced and nurtured by life experiences, particularly in childhood, or, conversely, diminished or destroyed (Bennett, 2001, 183-192). Indeed, as will be argued later in this article, the promotion and maintenance of optimism can be seen as a key function of many of our institutions – in effect, a form of implicit cultural policy. Nevertheless, biological factors should not be ignored and, whilst offering a powerful explanation of the prevalence of optimism within the human population, they can also perhaps contribute to our understanding of individual difference – of why some individuals and not others are able to remain optimistic under difficult circumstances.

Before concluding this section, two further observations need to be made. First, although it has been argued that the variable contents of optimism share a common 'form', and that this form constitutes an 'optimism of everyday life', we should not assume that it remains constant over time and across different contexts (Garber, 2000, 305; Affleck et al, 2002, 149). Many people will experience optimism in some domains of their life, or at some times, and pessimism at others. There is some evidence to suggest that, where optimism has been destroyed by damaging or traumatic experiences, those of an optimistic disposition will 'drift back' to an optimistic norm (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 202). But we should nevertheless be wary of

positing a 'one size fits all' optimism and, even more so, of attributing to it a general invulnerability. Optimism is, after all, one of the first casualties of depression, and, as noted earlier, a global increase in the incidence of depression has been widely reported.

Secondly, much of the research on the psychology of optimism has originated from American universities with American citizens as its subjects. The constructs of optimism that have been developed have thus arisen from a quite specific cultural context. We should not assume, therefore, that optimism takes on precisely the same form in every other culture, even though, as we have seen, a universal basis does suggest itself in our evolutionary history. For the most part, researchers have been aware of this and have exercised caution in generalising their findings too widely. For example, Edward Chang, from the University of Michigan, suggests that, in individualistic countries, such as the US, the self is generally constructed as independent of others and, thus, for citizens of these countries, optimism is usually derived from an expectation of personal rather than group happiness. In Asian countries, on the other hand, where a more interdependent construct of the self is traditionally fostered, optimism is more bound up with the success of the group (Chang, 2002a, 258). Within the US, Sethi and Seligman found in an earlier study that religion also had a significant bearing on the formation of optimism, with fundamentalist religions generating considerably more optimism than liberal religions (Sethi & Seligman, 1993, 259).

In surveying the literature on optimism, Christopher Peterson echoes Chang and observes that much of it, reflecting its own cultural bias, has been 'curiously asocial' (2000a, 50). This is not, of course, to suggest that optimism performs no social function, only that the emphasis of research has been on its function within the individual rather than society. Whilst this might be cast in terms of a psychological versus a sociological approach, the two are in fact closely entwined. Indeed, it is as difficult to conceive of an authentic, collective optimism that did not in some way answer to the desires of the individual as it is to conceive of an individual optimism that had no social dimension. It is certainly true that almost all the research on optimism has been conducted by psychologists, and that there is no 'sociology of optimism' to speak of. This may partly be due to the fact that within the development

of sociology itself, as noted earlier, pessimism has run deep. Indeed, it may not be pushing the point too far to suggest that a great deal of sociology, like psychology, has focused on a disease model of human functioning, though, in the case of sociology, the diseases have of course been social rather than individual. But, as we shall see in the next section, the various functions of optimism that psychologists have identified have very clear social and cultural implications. How these functions are reproduced and reinforced by our institutions will be addressed in the final section of the article.

### **The Functions of Optimism**

In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus wrote that the foremost question of philosophy was why one should not commit suicide (1991, 3). To suggest that optimists do not commit suicide, or, to put it more precisely, that people do not usually commit suicide when in an optimism frame of mind, is not an answer to this question; but it does point to the importance of optimism as a prophylactic against those experiences of hopelessness and depression, which, in their more severe and sustained forms, can lead to suicide. One only has to think of the consequences, either at an individual or collective level, of a total collapse of hope to appreciate quite how significant this function of optimism is. Indeed, it is so central to human existence – as necessary as air, according to Lionel Tiger – that it often goes unnoticed and unremarked upon. Even those who display the ‘biggest’ of intellectual pessimisms, concerning the prospects of a people, a nation or even the human species itself, will almost always be found to nurture a zone of optimism, however small, in some part of their lives.

This phenomenon has been well documented (Seligman, 1998; Vaughan, 2000). There is now also a significant body of research that offers insights into how optimism actually ‘works’. In a seminal article in 1988, Taylor and Brown pointed to the accumulating evidence that optimism was closely bound up with the harbouring of ‘positive illusions’ (1988, 196-7). Numerous studies had established that not only were such illusions held by most people, but that they played a crucial role in maintaining subjective well-being and psychological health. This had challenged the widely held view, dominant amongst psychologists until then, that such health depended upon an accurate perception of reality (Taylor & Brown 1988, 193).

According to Taylor and Brown, there are three dimensions to these illusions. Firstly, most people tend to maintain unrealistically positive views of themselves, persistently overestimating their strengths and discounting their weaknesses; secondly, they tend to have an exaggerated belief in their ability to control events; and thirdly, they nurture a view of the future that is unrealistically optimistic, believing that it will bring about what is personally or socially desirable rather than what is objectively likely (1988, 197). One of the ways in which this unrealistic optimism is demonstrated is by the general propensity of most individuals to think that they are less likely than their peers to experience bad events (such as getting seriously ill) and more likely than their peers to experience good events (such as producing happy and successful children). Because, of course, it is a statistical impossibility for most peoples' futures to be better than most others, it follows that the optimism being expressed is illusory. The pervasiveness of these illusions is strongly correlated with the finding, mentioned in the previous section, that most people report being happy most of the time. It is interesting to note that most people also report that they are happier than most others – another statistical impossibility (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 194-8).

Even though it can clearly be seen that optimism strengthens subjective well-being, it might be thought that the benefits of this function would be outweighed, or at least cancelled out, by the negative impacts of harbouring 'positive illusions'. After all, it is accurate information-processing, not cognitive distortion, that is usually held up as being essential for effective learning and successful social functioning. As we shall see, there can indeed be costs attached, but there are nevertheless a huge array of benefits with which an optimistic disposition or explanatory style have been associated. Where 'positive illusions' are involved, which would appear to be the rule rather than the exception, they have been shown to create self-fulfilling prophecies (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 199).

In the area of health, an optimistic disposition has been closely likened to 'superior psychosocial adaptation to a host of medical stressors' (Affleck et al, 2000, 147). These have included conditions as varied as coronary artery bypass surgery, childbirth, bone marrow transplantation, HIV-positive status and cancer. A key factor in explaining

this is the tendency of optimists to ruminate significantly less on their problems than pessimists. There is also strong evidence of an 'optimistic advantage' in relation to physical health itself (Scheier & Carver, 1992), although the precise mechanisms linking the two are more difficult to establish. We know that optimists catch fewer infectious diseases than pessimists do and that their immune systems may also work better. They also tend to have better health habits and there is even evidence to suggest that they may live longer (Seligman, 1998, 14). But this should not be construed as evidence that good health is all in the mind. Indeed, a number of researchers have emphasised that the major mechanism linking optimism and health is a 'mundane behavioural pathway' (Peterson & Bossio, 2000, 137; Zuckerman, 2000, 183) - in other words, optimists have better health because they do the right things (like eating healthy foods and taking exercise). Peterson & Bossio conclude that optimism is indeed one of the determinants of good health, but that it needs to be seen as part of a complex web of biological, psychological and social processes (2000, 128).

There is also evidence that optimism fulfils an important function within marriages, partnerships, family life and social relationships in general. Indeed, without optimism there would be no families, because there would be no commitment either to reproduce in the first place or to nurture a future generation. This is not to suggest that such optimism is always conscious: in fact, it can perhaps best be seen as a manifestation of that biological optimism discussed earlier. For Lionel Tiger, the imperative to reproduce, expressed in sexual activity, is derived from 'an ancient, deeply programmed biological process... which...connects the passionate present to the social future' (1995, 114).

Within marriages and partnerships, it appears that optimism, measured through explanatory style, has both immediate and long term impacts. Its immediate effects are on the day-to-day behaviour of partners; in the longer term, it appears to impact on the overall quality of their relationship, which has knock-on consequences for the their children and wider society (Fincham, 2000, 282). Seligman found a direct relationship between a parent's general level of optimism (particularly the mother's) and that of the child, although subsequent studies confirmed this link only when the child perceived a mother's optimism (or pessimism) as being specifically directed



towards him or her (Garber, 2000, 306). Outside of the family, optimists appear to form satisfactory social relationships with considerably less difficulty than pessimists (Norem, 2000, 92; Chang, 2000b, 273; Dember, 2000, 291).

The function of optimism has also been extensively documented in relation to achievement. If it is true, as the evidence suggests, that ‘when the going gets tough, the pessimistic stop going’, then the reverse is true as far as optimists are concerned. People with high expectations of success, which is a major component of optimism, have been shown to have more robust coping tendencies and to display more tenacity in the face of difficult problems than those with lower expectations. They also tend to work harder and longer and to devise more effective problem-solving strategies (Brown & Marshall, 2000, 240-1). For example, according to Aspinall et al, optimists appear better able to see all the features of a situation (‘global processing bias’), while those in a more pessimistic frame of mind tend to become absorbed in one component of it – in other words, they are unable to see the wood for the trees (2000, 232).

The various fields in which optimism has been linked to higher achievement include education, electoral politics, military leadership, business and sport (Seligman, 1998, 95-204). For example, in one notable study, researchers analysed the explanatory style of US presidential candidates between 1900 and 1984, by applying the CAVE technique (see page 8) to their acceptance-nomination speeches. In eighteen out of the twenty-two elections, voters chose the candidate who projected the greater optimism. The same researchers used this technique to predict accurately the outcome of the 1988 US presidential primaries (Seligman, 1998, 187-198). The CAVE technique has also been applied to the memoirs, diaries and letters of military leaders, such as the two renowned generals of the American Civil War, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee. In this study, optimism was indeed correlated with military success, with Grant’s significantly more optimistic outlook linked to his unexpected victories (Peterson & Bishop, 2000, 379).

As the preceding analysis indicates, there does now appear to be clear evidence that what we have termed the ‘optimism of everyday life’ performs important psychological and social functions across a broad range of contexts. In particular, we have pointed to the areas of psychological health and subjective well-being, physical

health, family and social relationships and the achievement of goals. It is not my intention, however, to ‘fetishise’ optimism, by abstracting it from all other determinants and attributing to it an independent or asocial agency. As I have already noted, even if it can be established as an isolatable element of human behaviour (which is by no means certain), it is still entangled with other cultural, social, psychological and biological processes.

Nor is it my intention to suggest that optimism is always positive and pessimism negative. In politics and economics, for example, optimism can have obvious social costs, such as bubbles in markets, policy failures and voter disillusion (Schwartz, 2000, 404-7). Pessimists, on the other hand, can sometimes be less prone to cognitive distortion and relied upon to bring a ‘depressive realism’ to analysis and decision-making (Bennett, 2001, 195). There can also be psychological costs to optimism, where ‘positive illusions’ shift from constructive self-enhancement to maladaptive and destructive egotism. In contrast, ‘defensive pessimism’ can function as a successful psychological strategy - a kind of ‘do-it-yourself’ cognitive therapy for anxiety (Norem, 2000). Nevertheless, despite these qualifications, it is evident that optimism – as a mode of viewing of the future – fulfils a central social and psychological function, in a way that pessimism clearly does not. Although, as we shall see, we may encounter rhetorics of pessimism, our institutions, and the social practices embedded in them, are almost without exception underpinned by ideologies of optimism. The content of these ideologies may conflict with one another, but in their mode of viewing the future, they can be seen to share a cultural form. In the next section, the reproduction and mediation of this culture will be considered as a manifestation of implicit cultural policy.

### **Optimism as Cultural Policy**

The idea of implicit cultural policy was first introduced by Jeremy Ahearne (2004, 112-136) and subsequently refined and developed in a special issue of the *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (Ahearne & Bennett, 2009). In brief, whilst ‘explicit’ cultural policy refers to policies explicitly labelled cultural, such as those pursued by ministries of culture around the world, ‘implicit’ cultural policy refers to all those deliberate courses of action intended to shape cultures, but which are not

expressly described as such. To some extent, these different constructs hinge upon a distinction between culture in the narrower sense of the term, as a set of artistic practices, and culture in the broader sense, as a set of behaviours, attitudes and values. When both constructs are brought together, the idea of cultural policy can be seen to encompass not only the sum total of a government's action on culture, including arts, media, educational, industrial and foreign policy, but also the actions of a very much more diverse set of agents and agencies, which can all be seen to be in the business of cultural propagation. These can include individuals, such as public intellectuals and cultural critics, and all those organisations, ranging from the religious to the criminal (think of the mafia, for instance), which set out to promote a particular set of cultural values or practices. In the issue of the *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, mentioned above, the Roman Catholic Church, Islamic institutions in Egypt, Working Mens' Clubs in England and elements of the British media are all seen to be operating forms of implicit cultural policy.

Ahearne also introduces the idea of historical necessity into cultural policy. In exploring Régis Debray's reflections on French cultural policy, Ahearne suggests that, whilst explicit cultural policy, as an autonomous area of public sector action, was not invented in France until the founding of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs under André Malraux in 1959, implicit cultural policy 'represents a transhistorical imperative for all political orders' (2004, 114). By this he means that since all political orders need, through the transmission of culture, to maintain their symbolic legitimacy, cultural policies have *de facto* been in operation for as long as political power itself. In this view, a state is not a visible object, but a set of relations, and unless these relations are maintained (the role of culture), then the state will break down. Cultural policy is thus not, as an exclusive focus on the explicit cultural policies of governments might suggest, the domain of a relatively minor department of government (often said to be the graveyard of ambitious ministers), but a necessary part of what holds a particular social and political order together.

This reference to necessity has a bearing on optimism at both the psychological and social level. We have already seen how the harbouring of 'positive illusions' plays an important role in maintaining subjective well-being and psychological good health. There are literally hundreds of studies showing that language, memory and thought

are selectively positive, with most people evaluating themselves positively and, in particular, more positively than they evaluate others (Peterson, 2000, 45). Anthony Greenwald, Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington, has likened human nature to a totalitarian regime, with the individual ego constantly revising its own history and maintaining itself in the most-flattering way possible (1980, 603). Yet, this could not be sustained without collusion at the social or collective level. Taylor and Brown point to the variety of social norms and strategies of social interaction that conspire to protect the individual from the harsher side of reality:

Each person is able to live out positive illusions relatively immune to negative feedback, because individually and collectively, people construct a social world that is as self-enhancing as the private, internal one and a cognitive system that maintains it...[T]he capacity to develop and maintain positive illusions may be thought of as a valuable human resource to be nurtured and promoted, rather than an error-prone processing system to be corrected (1988, 203-5).

Taylor and Brown are primarily concerned with presenting the evidence for these social norms and strategies and with analysing their function. However, what is of particular interest here, and indisputably a matter of cultural policy, is precisely how these optimistic norms are ‘nurtured and promoted’. As we have already seen, there is convincing evidence that optimism is, in part, a biological imperative. But this imperative is both given form and institutionally reinforced by what Lionel Tiger has referred to as ‘a complex array of optimism promoters’ (1995, xxi).

If we return briefly to some of those functions of optimism that we reviewed earlier, namely, psychological and physical health, family and social relationships and the achievement of goals, the ubiquity of institutional optimism quickly becomes clear. In the area of psychological health, for example, the family is a key institution for the inculcation of optimism in children. Thanks to the work of object-relations theorists, such as John Bowlby, we now know enough about the importance of a child’s early years to understand how the family environment can impact on his or her long-term development. Without the nurturing of those optimistic tendencies referred to above by Taylor & Brown, children are much more likely to develop those negative attitudes about themselves and the future, which can lead to depression and anxiety disorders as they grow older (Garber, 2000, 307). Indeed, the rise in the worldwide incidence of

depression, mentioned earlier, has been attributed to the breakdown of the capacity of the family to provide this nurturing environment, due to soaring divorce rates and an increase in the number of parents who themselves are suffering from depressive illnesses (James, 1997, 128-158). In effect, this can be seen as a policy failure on the part the family, one of the key institutions that plays a central role in the reproduction of cultures of optimism. The responsibility for this failure should not, of course, be attributed solely to the family, which, as is well documented, has been subject to powerful, disintegrating pressures from a number of different directions (Bennett, 2001, 89-95); but the family nevertheless remains a significant end-point at which this failure can be observed.

The growing incidence of depressive and anxiety disorders – whether as a result of childhood experiences, life events or genetic disposition – has in the course of the twentieth century led to the rapid growth of new professions specifically concerned with the promotion and maintenance of psychological health. It is worth noting here that, in the early days of psychoanalysis, Freud had speculated that one day a new kind of social worker would be created and that these workers, trained in psychoanalytical techniques, would form ‘a band of helpers for combating the neuroses of civilisation’ (1986, 65). Although many of Freud’s techniques have now been widely discredited, his prediction has nevertheless largely been fulfilled by the multitude of analysts, therapists and counsellors that have followed in his wake. This in turn has spawned a huge industry of self-help books and programmes, most of which can at some level be seen to address the ‘optimism deficit’. For instance, in a typical example of the genre, Susan Vaughan links optimism to illusions of control over one’s life and, in outlining a programme for generating such illusions, promises that if you ‘train yourself to think like an optimist...you will gradually become one’ (2000, 156). In Britain, cognitive therapies of this kind (CBT) have recently attracted governmental support, with the Department of Health investing heavily in the training of new therapists and the improvement of access to services (DOH, 2007).

Whether or not one considers religious institutions to be in the business of propagating ‘positive illusions’ depends to a large extent upon one’s own attitude towards religious faith; but they are indisputably in the business of promoting optimism. By way of example, a particularly striking account of the relationship

between optimism and Christian faith can be found in the writings of Helen Keller. The story of Keller's life is well-known from her own autobiography and from the numerous films and documentaries made about her: losing all vision and hearing at the age of eighteen months, probably due to scarlet fever, Keller, against all odds, acquired language and became a prolific author, public-speaker and political activist, committing herself, amongst other things, to the suffragette movement, pacifism and radical socialism. In her essay, *Optimism*, which she wrote in 1903 as a young woman of twenty-three, Keller reflects that 'deep, solemn optimism', of the kind that enabled her to escape from 'the depth where no hope was,' is derived from a firm belief in the presence of God (1903, 13, 29). Marx, of course, in his description of religion as the opium of the people, also acknowledged the psychological power of faith, albeit in unflattering terms. In more recent times, the connections between optimism, faith and happiness have been identified in a growing number of empirical studies (Myers, 2000, 331-333).

Turning to the area of physical health, it quickly becomes apparent that medical practice, too, is underpinned by a culture of optimism. It is no coincidence that Raymond Tallis, whose extensive critique of contemporary pessimism was referred to earlier, is not only a formidable cultural critic but also a professor of geriatric medicine. Medical scientists may no longer have quite the assurance they possessed in the 1950s and 1960s, when they confidently predicted that that by the twenty-first century every infectious disease in the world would have been eradicated (Garrett, 1995, 30) but, as Tallis observes, 'the goals of medicine remain what they have always been: cure some, improve many, comfort all' (1997, 136). In both research and clinical practice, medical science continues to subscribe to a narrative of progress, in which the treatment of disease and the alleviation of suffering becomes ever more effective. This is not say that it does not acknowledge the scale of the problems it faces, not least those arising from its own successes, such as resistance to the drugs it has created and unprecedented human longevity. Nor is it to ignore the role of the pharmaceutical industry, whose economic interests are integral to the development of medicine itself. But medical research is nevertheless is also strongly driven by optimism and its clinical applications promote it.

The excessive optimism that has periodically produced market bubbles, such as the dot com bubble of the late 1990s, and which, most recently, has resulted in the worldwide banking collapse of 2008, obscures the quotidian optimism without which no business would be able to function satisfactorily. However sophisticated the market research, a culture of optimism still has to be fostered if goods and services are to be sold and sales targets reached. This is most apparent within the recruitment and training of the sales force itself, as Seligman demonstrated in his study of the Metropolitan Life insurance company in 1982 (Seligman, 1998, 95-115). At the time of the study, this organisation was recruiting 5,000 people to its sales force each year, out of a total of 60,000 applications. Half of these resigned in the first year, with eighty per cent resigning by the end of the fourth year – at considerable cost to the company. Using the ASQ measure of explanatory style, Seligman found that optimism not only predicted who was most likely to stay in the job but also who would achieve the greatest number of sales. (Presumably, it was pessimists who were most likely to buy life insurance, but this irony was not noted by Seligman!) Although the necessity of optimism is perhaps at its most obvious within the general area of sales, it finds expression in virtually all of aspects of business life, from the mission statement down to the smallest of group meetings. In the non-profit sector, the disciplines of New Public Management, and the never-ending programme of institutional change that comes with it, can be seen as an expression of that optimistic managerial orthodoxy, which holds that increased efficiency and effectiveness can always be found.

In politics, as we have already seen, expressions of optimism have been linked with electoral success. Although Barack Obama's speeches and writings have, at the time of writing, not been rigorously tested for optimism through CAVE or other procedures, it is revealing that the book that launched his bid for the Democratic nomination in 2008 was entitled *The Audacity of Hope* and that political commentators have referred to his 'trademark optimism' (Beaman, 2008). It is a fair assumption that, if he had been tested, he would have scored highly on any optimism measures and his case would have confirmed the earlier studies. Indeed, his 'trademark optimism' was almost certainly a considered element in his electoral strategy.

What, however, has not been so widely discussed, is the way in which optimism is routinely deployed by political leaders as part of the broader strategy of maintaining their symbolic legitimacy once in power. The necessity of such a strategy, it will be recalled, is what Ahearne referred to as the ‘transhistorical imperative’ that gives rise to implicit cultural policies across all political orders. The promotion of optimism can clearly be seen as one of these policies. However bad the conditions of a people, whatever difficulties they may face, an optimistic vision of the future will be used to legitimise the hardships of the present. Optimism will always trump pessimism. Take, for example, Barack Obama’s inaugural address of 2009. Here, the condition of America, which his administration faces, is set out in the most pessimistic terms:

Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age.

Homes have been lost, jobs shed, businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly, our schools fail too many, and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet.

These are the indicators of crisis, subject to data and statistics. Less measurable, but no less profound, is a sapping of confidence across our land; a nagging fear that America's decline is inevitable, that the next generation must lower its sights.

But, of course, the peroration does not end here, and Obama, invoking the heroic struggles of the past – independence, Gettysburg, Normandy, civil rights - assures the nation that the great challenges faced by the current generation of Americans will be overcome. Urging the nation to ‘brave once more the icy currents’ and to ‘endure what storms may come’, Obama holds out the promise that when future generations look back, they will know that ‘when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, and that we did not turn back nor did we falter’ (2009).

Inaugural addresses demand both rhetorical ambition and elevated gravitas, particularly in difficult times or following the demise of an unpopular regime. Neither Margaret Thatcher nor Tony Blair possessed Obama’s rhetorical flair, nor do British Prime Ministers (who are not Heads of State) make inaugural addresses; but, traditionally, they make brief statements to the people before entering 10 Downing Street for the first time. Here, too, both Thatcher and Blair can be seen to make use of optimistic tropes. Thatcher quotes St Francis of Assisi: ‘Where there is discord’, she pledges (without apparent irony), ‘may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may



we bring truth...And where there is despair, may we bring hope'. For Blair, his new government will simply 'govern in the interests of all of our people, the whole of this nation. That', he concludes, 'I can promise you'.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have developed the construct of an 'optimism of everyday life' and proposed that it performs significant psychological, social and cultural functions. This construct can best be characterised as a *mode* of viewing the future, with no single or absolute content, but with a common, cognitive form, whose functions can be considered separately from the diverse content of its expressions. These functions have been briefly reviewed, with particular reference to psychological and physical health, family and social relationships and the achievement of goals in different contexts. I have argued that the necessity of optimism has given rise to a complex of optimism promoters, which function as agents of implicit cultural policy. The family, religious institutions, the medical profession, psychotherapists and counsellors, businesses and political leaders can, amongst others, all be seen to be part of this complex, deeply engaged in the reproduction of a culture of optimism.

As we have seen, optimism, like desire, rationality or ambition, is in its formal sense largely value-free: it is only in the specificities of its content that it takes on particular values. But the sum total of all the 'big' and 'little' optimisms, which make up the optimism of everyday life, can perhaps be seen to represent a kind of meta-value: of energy over entropy, of living over dying. This might help to explain not only the persistence of optimism, sometimes against all the odds, within individual lives, but also its vigorous promotion within so many of our institutions.

A sociology of optimism, as mentioned earlier, has yet to be fully formulated. This article, which has drawn mainly on developments in social psychology, evolutionary biology and cultural policy, points the way to a more thoroughgoing sociological investigation. In particular, sociologists might throw further light on how optimism is socially disseminated across the generations; at how it operates within the public sphere and at the societal level; and how it might be said to be embedded in cultural practices and resources. Also, a more nuanced distinction between the personal and social dimensions of optimism could be usefully developed.<sup>4</sup>

What has been sketched out here are only the contours of a cultural policy of optimism. Its proper articulation demands the work of more than one discipline. But

this contribution has perhaps gone a small way to offering an alternative perspective on optimism, which, for some of us, never fully recovered from the damage inflicted to it by Dr Pangloss.



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## Notes

John Butt suggests that Voltaire's target was not so much Leibnitz, but his reductionist popularisers, such as Alexander Pope (Butt, p8).

<sup>2</sup> To some readers in the social sciences the term 'everyday life' may have specific, negative connotations, which relate to routine, common sense reasoning procedures through which certain attitudes become 'naturalised'. Whilst an optimism of everyday life might usefully be interrogated from this perspective, it is first of all necessary to distinguish between different forms of optimism and to consider the extent to which they manifest themselves within human societies. This is the purpose of the following section of the paper, which draws largely on studies in social psychology.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Biswas-Diener & Diener (2001) note that slum dwellers in Calcutta reported well above the neutral point on measures of life satisfaction.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers of this article for these suggestions.

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